

# PURPLE FOODIE

## The Final Exam at Alain Ducasse

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I love cooking school exams, but this one at Alain Ducasse in France tops it all.

Our group of nine students was given a brief to work on a multi course gastronomic menu for 12 with a budget of €30/head for ingredients. Each one of us picked a course, some paired up for the more elaborate recipes to come up with a menu.

In the end, this is what it looked like:

Superior Cuisine at Alain Ducasse Education

December 2015

**Cocktail Snacks**

Winter barbagiuani with St. Maure and pumpkin

Mini burgers

Langoustine smoothie

Gougères with ham and black truffles

**Amuse-Bouche**

Oysters, yuzu, sea urchin vinaigrette and buckwheat crisps

**Entrée**

Pumpkin velouté and kale ravioli

**Fish**

Scallops, cauliflower and black truffles

**Meat**

Milk-fed veal, heirloom mushrooms and citrus salad

**Dessert**

White chocolate mousse, apple jelly and green apple sorbet

A friend of mine and I paired together. We chose to work on the meat course. We picked milk-fed veal and then decided to build from there.

When it comes to developing a dish I seek harmony on a plate. A balance of textures (soft/moist, creamy, crumbly, crunchy, unctuous) and flavours (sweet, salty, bitter, hot, sour, fresh, nutty, raw. Secondary favours: spicy, smoky). It's not necessary for each character to be represented on the plate, but the more the better, so long as it isn't forced. Some dramatic, most subtle.

I want the season to be reflected.

I like colour.

I want the dish to be layered. For example, if fresh hazelnuts are in season, I'll use them peeled (the most laborious job in the world!) and halved, tossed into a salad with maybe some hazelnut oil in the dressing. And then, the dried hazelnuts, toasted and chopped into nibs to make the crust for the meat.

In the end, the dish should look delicate and feminine.

We decided to make a trip to Terroir d'Avenir (fresh produce) and Librarie Gourmande (cookbook shop) for some research and inspiration. Terroir d'Avenir is my version of heaven on earth. I want to rent the flat upstairs from it just so I can cook with this beautiful produce every day. It's packed with quality produce from around Europe. Just look at their lemon section alone. We got a few different ones to experiment with – bergamot, Meyer lemons, Buddha's hand, capucine tubers in three colours (the attendant said it is very strong like wasabi when raw and tastes like asparagus when cooked) and helianthus roots (very similar to Jerusalem artichokes in flavour, they don't disintegrate when cooked). A bottle of quince vinegar too because it smelled and tasted so incredible.

At the cookbook shop we flipped through the books, but we realised we were quite clear about what we wanted to do.

Exam day came along. Day One was about getting all the *mise-en-place* ready. We trimmed and tied the veal, cut the vegetables, made the bergamot and olive oil infusion, toasted and chopped the hazelnuts, suprêmed the citrus, made the mousseline of helianthus and the helianthus crisp. Everything was done with utmost care and attention. Even the carrots were scrubbed down with scouring pad by my diligent partner so as to even out the vertical lines created by the vegetable peeler. All set for final day.

We came in early just so we didn't feel rushed when the madness of service set in. We organised everything for the morning and got started. We made the veal jus (we deglazed the meat with mead instead of the traditional white wine), cooked the buttery orange juice carrots, washed and spun the salad leaves, shaved the Pecorino and the whisked the vinaigrette.

Service hour was quick. 12 hot plates set out on the pass. Some classmates around to help plate and it was out the door. We explained our dish to the jury with bit about the story of how we came up with the recipe.

My chef at Alain Ducasse was opposed to the idea of me plating a salad on a hot plate. Granted that a hot plate isn't the best place for fresh greens but I wanted it to look like a beautiful, composed dish with the 3 elements laid out in harmony. Not diner style with a bowl of salad on the side. I did what I felt like and it was well received. Three people (three!) from the jury, pointed out that they especially enjoy the salad. I was beaming. It was a special salad. Winter bitters, puckery citrus, and the most amazing vinaigrette (if I can say so myself) of quince vinegar and bergamot infused olive oil. Pretty flowers too, to finish it off.

As for the grades? I really wish we were graded based on our dishes alone, as opposed to a single grade for the collective menu made by the entire class. I was so pleased with what we put out. 89.